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Tunisia: Cautious Liberalization

An Intelligence Assessment

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Tunisia: Cautious Liberalization

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**Tunisia:
Cautious Liberalization**

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Key Judgments

The Tunisian political system has undergone a process of gradual liberalization since the appointment of Mohamed Mzali as Prime Minister in April 1980. The government has integrated moderate oppositionists into the Cabinet and the ruling Destour Socialist Party and has reduced restrictions on opposition activities. The Prime Minister has launched a vigorous campaign against corruption and dishonesty within the government and party.

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It is unlikely, however, that Tunisia under the generally authoritarian President Bourguiba will develop into a two-party or multiparty state. Bourguiba continues to dominate the Tunisian political system and provides a check on Mzali's ability to implement change. There is substantial popular discontent with the Bourguiba regime, but there is no evidence of serious opposition that could threaten his political survival.

Social, political, and economic unrest in Tunisia remain largely latent. Student groups are factionalized, and religious revivalists generate little popular support among the Tunisian masses. Chronic labor troubles aggravated by issues linked to an impending national labor congress pose a more immediate problem. The political uncertainties involved in the eventual presidential succession, which will be the first in Tunisia's history, may present the first real opportunity for the manifestation of this latent opposition.

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The likelihood of political instability following the death of President Bourguiba has been increased by Mzali's inability to develop a political base independent of the President. As Prime Minister and constitutional successor to the presidency, however, Mzali will be in a strong position to compete in any political infighting that follows the death of Bourguiba.

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A Mzali presidency probably would ensure further liberalization of the political system. Mzali would be likely to concentrate on domestic and regional issues. While limiting Tunisian involvement in international matters, he would continue to be generally supportive of US foreign policies.

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The Tunisian political system is dominated, as it has been for 40 years, by President Habib Bourguiba. Although in his late seventies and suffering from cerebral arteriosclerosis, Bourguiba continues to direct Tunisian policy and manipulate Tunisian politics. Bourguiba's physical condition fluctuates from day to day, but he has taken a more active part in the daily activities of the government since Prime Minister Hedi Nouira suffered a stroke in early 1980.

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Mohamed Mzali, who was appointed "coordinator of governmental affairs" at the time of Nouira's illness, was appointed Prime Minister by Bourguiba on 23 April 1980. As Prime Minister and secretary general of the Destour Socialist Party, Mzali is the legally designated successor to Bourguiba as president of the country and of the party. A Bourguiba loyalist, Mzali was not associated with any of the factions involved in the political infighting at the 1979 national party congress and therefore fulfilled Bourguiba's desire to have an apolitical prime minister succeed the powerful Nouira. Since his appointment as Prime Minister, Mzali has gained the trust and confidence of President Bourguiba, but at the same time has been forced to recognize the limits of his political independence.

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Cautious Liberalization

Since coming into office Mzali—with Bourguiba's authorization—has taken some significant steps toward political liberalization that have found acceptance among both supporters and opponents of the political system. An advocate of political openness and dialogue, Mzali has been responsible for broadening the base of popular support for the regime and has reduced social and political tensions that had developed over the past few years. Although his actions are always reported as being taken "in accordance with presidential directives," Mzali deserves much credit for designing these measures and—of equal importance—for securing Bourguiba's approval of them.

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Of all the reforms instituted by Mzali, the most popular, although the most politically risky, has been the

Prime Minister's anticorruption campaign within the party and government. Individuals identified as corrupt are being removed by Bourguiba at the behest of Mzali and Destour Socialist Party director Mongi Kooli. Some of those culpable, including at least one National Assembly member, face prosecution for misuse of party funds and official position—something unheard of during the Nouira administration. Prosecutor General Mohamed Farhat's position was abolished by Bourguiba when Mzali notified the President of Farhat's interference in a local election dispute. Although many other corrupt high-level government officials have been untouched by the campaign, the apparent dedication of Mzali and the willingness on the part of Bourguiba to support the Prime Minister have noticeably shaken other officials.

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All indications are that Mzali has satisfactorily passed his probation period and is no longer viewed by the President as an interim prime minister. Over the past several months Bourguiba has given him added responsibilities and has repeatedly referred to him as the presidential successor, a reference he carefully avoided during Mzali's first few months in office. Mzali's political survival and success is attributable to his skill in persuading Bourguiba that he is a political adviser rather than an independent policymaker. Failure to maintain this image would result in Mzali's immediate removal and probably in a retreat from the political reforms that he has designed.

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The recent shift toward political liberalization has included not only a change in government policies but also the appointment of political liberals to government and party offices. Driss Guiga, a personal foe of Nouira, was appointed Minister of Interior in March, and in April Mongi Kooli replaced party director Mohamed Sayah, a powerful opportunist who personally orchestrated Nouira's successes in the party. Mzali, Kooli, and Guiga, under the watchful eye of President Bourguiba, have formed the new liberal front that has succeeded in purging much of Nouira's influence from the government and party.

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In December 1980 President Bourguiba appointed as Minister of Information Tahar Belkhodja, a former Minister of Interior who was discredited under the Nouira administration. The appointment of Belkhodja may be a reminder to the Prime Minister that although he enjoys the President's confidence, the President alone makes the key decisions. Politically rehabilitated, Belkhodja, a favorite of the President's wife, Wassila Bourguiba, is apparently in line for a more important Cabinet position and an influential role at the national congress of the party in May 1981. []

Over the past year there has been evidence of growing tolerance for political opposition on the part of the government. Moderate oppositionists have been brought into the government and party, and certain restrictions on opposition activities have been removed. Although the Destour is Tunisia's only official party, two members of the moderate faction of Tunisia's unofficial loyal opposition—the Social Democrats—have been appointed to cabinet-level positions. Minister of Transport and Communications Sadok Ben Jomma, who was elected to the National Assembly in November 1980, and Minister Attached to the Prime Minister Beji Caid es-Sebsi have accepted reintegration into the government while retaining their affiliation with the Social Democrats. []

The moderate faction of the Social Democrats, headed by Hassib Bin Ammar, has enjoyed relative political freedom over the past year and publishes two party newspapers, the monthly *Democratie* and a weekly called *Er-Rai*. Of more significance is the recent government authorization for the more hardline faction of the Social Democrats, headed by former Minister of Interior Ahmed Mestiri, to publish its own independent newspapers. The first issue of the Arabic-language *Mostakbal* appeared on 1 December 1980, and the parallel French-language *l'Avenir* will begin publication in early 1981. []

In a conciliatory move aimed at improving relations between the government and influential nongovernmental organizations throughout Tunisia, the Tunisian Government has released from jail all political prisoners (perhaps between 100 and 200) and has allowed many political exiles to return with the understanding that pending charges or standing convictions will not be acted upon. In addition, a number of police

officials have been removed for the mistreatment and abuse of prisoners and suspects, with some offenders facing legal charges. []

Potential Areas of Instability

Labor. Continued labor unrest over the last several months has prompted the government to attempt to reestablish a quasi-independent labor organization. Mzali and Kooli have persuaded Bourguiba to make concessions to remedy Tunisia's longstanding labor problems. Although Habib Achour, former secretary general of the General Union of Tunisian Workers, remains under house arrest and is prohibited from participating in labor activities, Bourguiba has recently pardoned all of the labor activists implicated in the strikes of 26 January 1978. []

In a compromise designed to pacify the various factions within the union, the government formed a national commission in October 1980 charged with preparing an extraordinary union congress. This was originally scheduled for January 1981, but was later postponed until early March. The commission, headed by Nouridienne Hached (son of union founder Ferhat Hached) consists of nine members of the pre-26 January 1978 union executive bureau and nine members of the executive bureau of the succeeding union led by Tijani Abid. Achour was noticeably absent from the list, as was Abid, who subsequently resigned as secretary general in protest. Although Achour has rejected the compromise, there is evidence that his rank-and-file support has been reduced, and his faction of the union leadership may be willing to accept his defeat for the greater interests of the union and the Tunisian labor movement. If this latest government attempt at solving Tunisia's longstanding labor problem fails, however, Mzali and Kooli will pay a heavy political price as Bourguiba's scapegoats. []

Students. Chronic political and economic discontent with the Bourguiba government, heightened by tight government restrictions on campus activities and insufficient employment opportunities, have resulted in widespread student discontent. Student unhappiness, however, has not triggered significant unrest. The General Union of Tunisian Students, polarized between the left and Islamic right, has been unable to act in an organized manner, and the sporadic demonstrations that have occurred appear to be spontaneous

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reactions to arbitrary government policies rather than calculated efforts on the part of the union's weak and ineffective leadership. Such demonstrations, similar to the one in April 1980 protesting the hanging of 13 convicted insurrectionists who took part in a Libyan-backed raid on the Tunisian town of Qafsah in early 1980, are lightly attended and are easily controlled by the Public Order Brigade. The government believes—probably with justification—that these outbreaks are not serious threats, and consequently the security police are under orders not to engage on heavyhanded countermeasures. []

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As a former Minister of Education and a proponent of the Arabization of the Tunisian educational system, Mzali enjoys wide respect among the students and faculties of Tunisian universities. Although there has been little relaxation of government controls on student activities since Mzali's appointment, it is likely that a Mzali presidency would at least reduce existing tensions and perhaps lead to more conciliatory policies toward students. []

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Islamic Movement. President Bourguiba has been relatively successful in his secularization of Tunisian society. The widespread religious fervor that was manifest in Iran is unlikely to occur in a more Westernized country like Tunisia. The heightened consciousness of Islam, while appealing to the religious instincts of the majority of Tunisians, has had little impact on the political strength of the Tunisian Islamic fundamentalist movement, which has remained loosely organized, poorly funded, and unable to influence government policy or officials. It is possible, however, that during a period of political transition and/or political instability, Islam would be an attractive force that could have widespread appeal. []

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There are a number of prominent fundamentalists in Tunisia, of whom Rachid Gannouche has been considered the "most dangerous" and the "most intelligent" and the one who best represents the movement. A traditionalist similar to the Ayatollah Khomeini, Gannouche adheres to a strict interpretation of Koranic law and has called for an end to secular government. He is well respected in Islamic circles, but is criticized by his detractors as being out of touch with modern realities. []

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Another fundamentalist, Hassan Ghodbani, a former Marxist who was converted to Islam in 1970, is much more radical in his views and is vehemently anti-West and anti-Communist. This young, impassioned Tunisian has a small following among the religious right, but has been tainted by his foreign connections, specifically his acceptance of Syrian and Iraqi funds. Although Ghodbani may have potential appeal among the more radical elements of the movement, he appears to be more concerned with the international Islamic movement than with Tunisia's Islamic revival. []

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Abdelfatah Moro, a young Tunisian lawyer who has an undetermined following among the urban middle class, is the best known of the fundamentalists. Considered a moderate by most fundamentalists, Moro has been berated by traditionalists for being too closely aligned with the Tunisian elite and more concerned with his own status than with the development of the fundamentalist movement. Nevertheless, Moro's religious moderation appeals to the secular nature of Tunisian society, and he continues to be identified as Tunisia's leading religious figure. []

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Military. The Tunisian armed forces have remained apolitical. There has been no evidence of coup plotting or serious political unrest among senior-level officers, who are viewed as part of the government establishment by the rest of the military. Although considered loyal to President Bourguiba, the bulk of the armed forces is drawn primarily from the lower and middle classes and consequently could be expected to sympathize with a popular movement that had the support of a large segment of the population. If there is a protracted and destabilizing power struggle in the post-Bourguiba era, it is uncertain what role the military might play. There is no reason to believe that the Tunisian military would intervene during an orderly transfer of presidential power. []

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Tunisian military officers generally have a positive attitude toward the United States and consider the United States to be Tunisia's strongest ally. Several junior-grade Tunisian officers receive military training in the United States every year. There are occasional periods of anti-American sentiment within the Tunisian military such as in the wake of the Islamic

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revolution in Iran, but anti-American feeling appears to be neither strong nor widespread. There is a much greater feeling of disappointment with the United States over what is perceived to be its unwillingness to sell Tunisia modern military weapons and spare parts.

Prime Minister Mzali recently created the office of military adviser to the Prime Minister in order to involve himself more directly in military affairs and improve military-civilian coordination. Although the loyalty of the military is unquestioned, there has been substantial disgruntlement over inadequate salaries and lack of promotion opportunities.

Political Opposition

Domestic. Organized opposition groups throughout the country are generally weak and enjoy only minimal public support, in large part because the Destour is Tunisia's only official and legal political party. The Social Democrats, a collection of former government officials and former members of the Destour Party whose opposition to the Bourguiba regime has lessened with decreased government restrictions, is the most visible and tolerated of the opposition groups. Currently factionalized, a number of Social Democrats have accepted reintegration into the government and Destour Party. There are indications that some prominent Social Democrats are willing to accept less than the official status for their party that was the original goal of the movement.

Opposition Abroad. A number of political exiles continue to be identified as leading oppositionists to the Bourguiba regime, although even the most popular among them retain little active support. Ahmed Ben Salah, head of the Movement of Popular Unity and former Minister of Planning who engineered the Tunisian "collectivist" economic experiment during the late 1960s, is considered to have widespread, but latent, appeal among Socialists who are disenchanted with the economic policies of the Bourguiba regime. Ibrahim Tobal, titular head of the Tunisian People's Revolutionary Party residing in Algeria, reportedly has been active in seeking financial support from Arab countries. Tobal's activities may be restricted, however, because of the recent decision of the Algerian

Government—acting in response to improved relations with Tunisia—to limit the actions of Tunisian oppositionists living in Algeria.

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Libyan Involvement. Since the Libyan-sponsored commando raid in January 1980 on the southern Tunisian town of Qafsah, President Bourguiba has become increasingly concerned with the potential Libyan threat to Tunisia. Qadhafi's continued funding of Tunisian dissidents in exile and the enrollment of thousands of Tunisians in Libyan training camps add to the heightened tensions. Although no further raids have occurred, Bourguiba believes that the absence of an effective international response to the Libyan move into Chad will encourage Qadhafi to renew his efforts against Tunisia.

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A border incident in late November, which resulted in the death of a Libyan police official, presented an opportunity for Bourguiba to draw attention to the Libyan threat. Although a Tunisian border patrol overreacted when a Libyan vehicle mistakenly strayed across the Tunisian border, the Tunisian Government was able to prevent a Libyan reaction by portraying the Libyans as the aggressors. Involved with events in Chad, Qadhafi chose to ignore the incident.

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United States Interests

President Bourguiba traditionally has been pro-West in his views and is particularly friendly toward the United States. His support of US policies has ranged from moral support for the US war effort in Vietnam to boycotting the 1980 Moscow Olympics. More recently Bourguiba, growing more concerned about the potential Libyan threat to Tunisia and anticipating the change in the United States administration, pressed the United States for increased economic and military assistance, specifically in credits to be used for the purchase of F-5 aircraft and M-60 tanks.¹

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Although Tunisia has traditionally endorsed Western views in international affairs, it has maintained normal, if not overly warm, relations with the Soviets.

¹ The Carter administration increased from \$15 million to \$30 million the level of FY 1981 credits and proposed \$60 million credit for Tunisia in the FY 1982 budget.

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25X1 Bourguiba wants to retain Tunisia's nonaligned status—a fact that may explain his apparent vacillation over whether to let Soviet submarines use the repair facilities at the naval base in Bizerte. Although under Nouira Tunisia forbade the use of these facilities by Soviet submarines, a Soviet submarine made an official visit to the La Goulette Port in Tunis in July 1980 for the first time in several years. [REDACTED]

25X1 A Mzali presidency would ensure the continuation of good relations between the United States and Tunisia, although it is likely that Mzali would endorse US foreign policies with less fervor than the outspoken Bourguiba. Since his appointment as Prime Minister, Mzali has stressed the importance of domestic and regional issues and has only superficially addressed matters of international concern. During a meeting with Secretary of State Muskie, Mzali emphasized Tunisia's continuing need for military aid, which would enable Tunisia to continue the level of funding of economic development programs. Mzali stated that US military assistance was vital to give Tunisia a credible deterrent to those nations (read Libya), seeking to undermine Tunisia's national security. [REDACTED]

Presidential Succession

Because of the unique nature of the Bourguiba presidency and the pervasive impact of "Bourguibism" on the Tunisian political system, there are a number of problems inherent in the presidential succession in Tunisia. Unlike most other former French African colonies, the Tunisian Constitution gave the president of the republic an inordinate amount of political power. The office of the Tunisian presidency has been inextricably associated with the charismatic Bourguiba, and the powers given to the president by the Constitution have been intended more for the person of Habib Bourguiba than for the office itself. This is well evidenced by the 1975 constitutional provision that made Bourguiba president of the republic for life. [REDACTED]

The possibility of political instability in the period immediately following Bourguiba's death will exist at least until Mzali is able to form a political base of his own. Although Mzali has achieved a degree of success as Prime Minister, Bourguiba's insistence that Mzali not develop into an independent political force could jeopardize a future Mzali presidency. One consolation of Mzali is that no other political figure has been able to develop a personal power base divorced from Bourguiba. As Prime Minister and constitutional successor to the presidency, Mzali is in a strong position to compete in any political infighting that may follow the death of Bourguiba. [REDACTED]

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Among other key political personalities expected to play a prominent role immediately following Bourguiba's death are Tahar Belkhodja, Mohamed Sayah, and Mongi Kooli. The ambitious Belkhodja's recent political rehabilitation makes him a likely power contender, and he could attempt to eclipse Mzali. Although Sayah has been politically stifled by Bourguiba over the past year, he still retains wide support within the Destour Socialist Party and can be expected to capitalize on that support when Bourguiba is gone. As present party director Kooli is in a potentially powerful position to exert influence over members of the party, whose support will be vital to Bourguiba's successor. [REDACTED]

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